

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



January 12, 2016

Talks May Start with 'Reconcilables'

To pave the way for a peace negotiation with Taliban, a coordination meeting was held among the representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China in Islamabad on Monday January 11, 2016. The Quadrilateral Coordination Committee met to decide the road map towards a fruitful peace talk with Taliban.

For Afghanistan it is really important that a negotiated, fruitful and lasting peace should conclude years of fighting and terrorism. The people of Afghanistan have been waiting for such a conclusion but that has not come and their hopes are being shattered. Previously as well, they were given the good news about such a peace but that could never turn into reality. The important point is to see what is going to happen in this episode.

This effort seems to have some energy and optimism connected to it. Since the disappointment after Murree talks, this effort seems an opportunity to start anew. Definitely, the important factor is that the stakeholders must be fully prepared to pursue it willingly. What is going to be the outcome of the talks is difficult to say but at the moment more energy should be reserved on making everybody ready for the talks. If the stakeholders participate in the talks with unwilling intentions, it would be very difficult to expect any tangible outcome.

Afghanistan has mostly doubted the efforts by Pakistan, but it has also agreed that its honest efforts are necessary for pursuing any sort of negotiations with Taliban. Pakistan, since the Heart of Asia Conference, has given clear consent that it will coordinate the negotiations. Moreover, US and China have decided to directly monitor the process. Yesterday's meeting was the first step in the same direction. And, if there are continuous and determined actions, there will be tangible outcomes of the process.

Yesterday's meeting disclosed some of the important points regarding the peace process. And, separately Afghan authorities revealed to the media that Pakistan would hand the participants a list of the Taliban ready for dialogue with President Ashraf Ghani's administration. A couple of days earlier, Chief Executive Officer Dr. Abdullah's deputy spokesman Javid Faisal said that Pakistan's list would identify the Taliban who were willing for peace talks.

Pakistani adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz, however, said in his opening remarks during Monday's meeting, "Threat of the use of military action against irreconcilables cannot precede the offer of talks to all the groups and their response to such offers. Distinction between reconcilables and irreconcilables and how to deal with the irreconcilables can follow once the avenues for bringing them to the talks have been exhausted."

It is important to see how the division of 'reconcilables' and 'irreconcilables' would work. Moreover, it is imperative that the reconcilables must be the ones who are leading the insurgency in Afghanistan. Without reaching to the right persons who are practically involved in the fight, it would be very difficult to get any decisive result from the process.

Sartaj Aziz, in his opening remarks, also emphasized on a number of elements that he said would help achieve a meaningful outcome including the avoidance of setting preconditions ahead of the negotiation process.

Firstly, the primary objective of the reconciliation process is to create conditions to bring the Taliban groups to the negotiation table and offer them incentives that can persuade them to move away from using violence as tool for pursuing political goals. It is, therefore, important that pre-conditions are not attached to the start of the negotiation process. This in our view will be counterproductive.

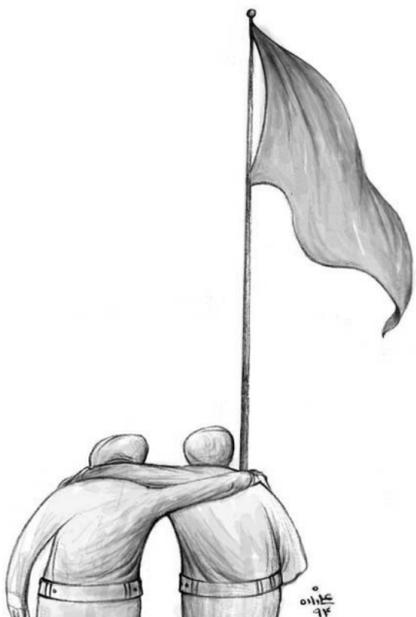
Secondly, proper sequencing of actions and measures in the process would be significant in paving the way for direct talks with Taliban groups.

Thirdly, certain CBMs (confidence building measures) can play a key role in encouraging Taliban groups to join the negotiation process.

Fourthly, while the roadmap is important for charting the course of action, it has to be realistic and flexible. It should broadly define steps and phases, but avoid unrealistic targets and deadlines.

Finally, while positive public messaging is important, keeping in view the sensitive nature of Group's work, it should be our endeavor to keep the work of this group out of media glare, as much as possible.

Though it can be negotiated whether the conditions for the negotiations can already be discussed; it should not be negotiated whether there should be a ceasefire or not, before the peace talks. Ceasefire is not a condition; it is a prerequisite. As soon as the parties agree to the talks, there should be a ceasefire. Peace negotiations can never succeed with continuous fighting. Fighting would take more lives, mostly of guiltless citizens, and it would also generate more hatred and complexities. Therefore, it is vital that Taliban should be made to agree for a ceasefire as soon as there is willingness to start peace negotiations.



The Capabilities and Weaknesses of ANSF

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

As the Afghan Government is preparing for another bloody year of Taliban campaign, a NATO internal report has concluded that the security situation would further deteriorate while the Afghan army is not well capable of dealing with the hard-headed insurgency. Media reports suggest that based on NATO evaluation of the Afghan armed forces, the Afghan National Army is hardly ready for military operations against the Taliban and other militant groups. According to the report, only one unit of the overall 101 infantry units of the Afghan army across the country is ready to fight while "major problems" have been noticed in other units. For example, the report says, ten battalions with each having 600 soldiers have never been deployed for combat operations. The leaked NATO report is coming while there are widespread concerns in the country over how the Afghan security forces would deal with another, and perhaps much fiercer, round of the Taliban military offensive next spring.

Recently, the parliament summoned top security officials over the military campaign against the Taliban and the prospect of the Taliban offensive next year.

The officials said that there would be a more difficult year ahead as the Taliban will try to mount another year of campaign against the Afghan security forces. The government officials assured the MPs that the security agencies were prepared to take the war to the insurgent groups and disrupt the militants' preparations for the next spring offensive.

The Taliban are believed to be reorganizing for the next spring offensive against the government of Afghanistan, with the group trying to establish supply routes in northern provinces. The militants have been waging a persistent campaign this year for taking grounds in the northern provinces as well as capturing some key districts in the southern Helmand province.

In 2015, the Afghan army and police forces fought a bitter campaign against Taliban in major provinces in the north, east and south of the country.

The Afghan security forces did exhibit some praiseworthy capabilities in suppressing the Taliban and denying the militants to take any major areas for long. The fall of Kunduz province came as the most embarrassing setback for the government forces as it marked Taliban's first major achievement since the fall of their regime in 2001. The fall of Kunduz laid bare some of most important weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the government in battling the insurgency.

Last year was the most challenging year for the Afghan forces in terms of the extent and intensity of the insurgency across the country. The army and police forces fighting the Taliban and other militant groups suffered major shortcomings and deficiencies ranging from weaponry and equipment to coordination and intelligence.

The Afghan security forces engaged in bitter wars in large areas of the country which stretched the army's strength and resources. The Taliban perhaps deliberately chose to open

multiple fronts in the battle against the government forces to weaken the army's strength and resources. The Afghan National Security Forces fought the Taliban in many provinces in the north and south of the country while they fought the Islamic State group in the east of the country. In addition, as part of a strategy focused on reacting to the Taliban threats, the Afghan army forces were being deployed in small units in response to immediate threats from the insurgents. This led to undermining the government forces as they were always fighting in a reactive approach to the Taliban's attacks. The acting minister of defense confessed in a hearing in the parliament that the approach was wrong, and it undermined government's war efforts against the Taliban and other militant groups.

Another major deficiency in the management of the ANSF was lack of sufficient coordination among units stationed on the battlefields and the central headquarters. The army units were reported to suffer heavy casualties as result of being caught under Taliban siege or heavy assault in different parts of the country.

The lack of sufficient coordination led to potential undermining of the government forces in the fight against Taliban. Intelligence is another Achilles' heel of the Afghan government forces in the campaign against the insurgency. The Afghan forces heavily rely on NATO-led coalition in major areas such as intelligence and air firepower. This is while the coalition forces have been drawing down from Afghanistan, and Afghan forces have been shouldering the burden of the war against the insurgency alone.

The government of Afghanistan has recently stepped up efforts to get warplanes for the Afghan air force to boost the campaign against the Taliban.

The Indian and US governments have provided a warplanes to the Afghan forces, however, the fledgling air force of Afghanistan still has a long path ahead for becoming professional and capable in providing air support to ANSF. The government equipment of the air force would turn the tide in favor of the security forces in the fight against the Taliban and other militant groups.

The air force would hopefully provide some air support for the Afghan ground forces next year as the government struggles to receive planes and equipment from the international community.

Due to the high rate of the ANSF casualties and the escalating war by the insurgent groups, the Afghan army and police forces have been facing desertion of soldiers from army and police ranks. The high rate of attrition is potentially weakening the armed forces of Afghanistan. The desertion from the army and police ranks has been particularly high in more volatile areas of Afghanistan.

The government needs to take actions in receiving help from the international community to further boost capabilities of the Afghan army and police forces.

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Muslims - The Scapegoat of Terror

By Hujjatullah Zia

We don't simply welcome new arrivals, we are born of immigrants, that is who we are, immigration is our origin story ... For more than two centuries it's remained at the core of our national character, it's our oldest tradition, it's who we are, it's part of what makes us exceptional," these words were spoken by US President Barack Obama.

As tens of thousands of people try to flee war and strife in large expanses of Asia and Africa every month, one question unblinkingly stares policy-makers in the face: should the US, Europe and wealthy Gulf Arab states open the door to increased immigration from Syria and other war-scarred Muslim-majority countries?

The bloody attacks by ISIL or al-Qaeda-linked groups in Beirut, Paris and Bamako did not only create a tense situation for Muslims but also posed a challenge ahead of immigrants. To the asylum-seekers' unmitigated chagrin, the December 2 assault by Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, that killed 14 people and wounded 21 more in San Bernardino, California, aggravated the problem and brought new dimension to the debate.

Already, in the wake of the November 13 Paris attacks that claimed at least 130 lives and left hundreds more injured, 26 mostly Republican US state governors said they would not accept refugees from Syria even though they have little power to interfere with federal resettlement programs. Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has converted the resettlement plan practically into the central plank of his campaign, peppering his speeches and interviews with tirades that insult not only Syrian refugees but Muslim Americans in general.

According to recent reports, a Muslim woman wearing hijab was escorted out of US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's campaign event on Friday for standing up in silent protest during his speech. A 56-year-old flight attendant, Rose Hamid, who was seated in the stands directly behind Trump wearing a hijab and a t-shirt that read "Salam, I come in peace", stood up during Trump's speech when the Republican front-runner suggested that Syrian refugees fleeing war in Syria are affiliated with the Islamic State. "Despite Hamid's silence, supporters around her began chanting Trump's name, as coached by Trump campaign staff prior to the event in case of protests, and pointed at Hamid and Marty Rosenbluth, the man beside her who stood up as well." Speaking to CNN after she was ejected, Hamid said: "The ugliness really came out fast and that's really scary". She said she did not plan to shout or disrupt the event and she just wanted to give Trump supporters a glimpse of what Muslims are like. "I figured that most

Trump supporters probably never met a Muslim so I figured that I'd give them the opportunity to meet one," she is quoted as saying.

Reportedly, Trump commented on the disturbance after Hamid and three others, who were all wearing stars suggestive of those worn by Jews during the Holocaust, were escorted out by the police. "There is hatred against us that is unbelievable," Trump is cited as saying. "It's their hatred, it's not our hatred."

It is aptly said, "The irony is unmistakable when one considers the little-known fact that the Statue of Liberty in New York, the symbol of democracy and freedom that has greeted tens of millions of immigrants to the US since 1886, was inspired - according to researchers for the US National Park Service - by a project representing an Arab peasant woman guarding the Suez Canal in Egypt."

Obama has also addressed Americans that when "you see individuals in positions of responsibility suggesting Christians are more worthy of protection than Muslims are in a war-torn land, that feeds the ISIL narrative". Following the escalation in militancy and terror in US and Europe, Obama renewed determination to destroy the Islamic State group, vowing to win back territory in the Middle East and kill the group's leaders. Listing a series of Islamic State leaders killed in coalition operations, Obama issued a stern warning. "ISIL leaders cannot hide," he said. "Our next message to them is simple, you are next."

Whenever a surge of hatred and panic surfaced in the US and Muslims were changed into scapegoat in public, Obama sought to protect the individuals' rights irrespective of their color, race or beliefs. Based on Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and one must not be discriminated on the grounds of their cast, creed or color. The world knows that ISIL does not represent Islam and this insurgent group targeted Muslims more than any other nation around the globe. Therefore, it would be irrational of those who hold Muslims in contempt solely for a couple of terrorists happened to be Muslims.

Politicians should not succumb to their personal feelings and emotions and avoid directing the public attention towards a critical point. Rather than turning turbulence in their own favor, the politicians have to show a backlash against the terrorist groups, mainly ISIL. It is believed that closing door to the war victims will not alleviate the crisis. A globally military campaign should be launched against the terrorist networks and their leaders to root out militancy and save the life of every man and woman in any corner of the world regardless of their racial or religious backgrounds.

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